

Marriage- An Abundant Life Sentence
Proverbs 31:10-31 Ephesians 5:21-28 John 13:31-35
Valentine's Day Homily February 14, 2010

Happy Valentine's Day! Our whole nation pauses from shoveling snow to focus on love, on relationships, on the ties that bind individuals together. And today makes some of us really happy, and today makes most of us at least a little sick. Florists- really happy. Chocolate makers- really happy. Restaurants- really happy. Those who received Valentine's cards and even gifts from the right person, really, really happy. Those of us who just broke up with the one we *thought* was the right person, not so happy. Those of us who have lost their loved one to death, not happy at all. Those of us who are happily single, or who have experienced the freedom that comes from ending an empty or even horrific marriage, well, we just think the whole nation is crazy for setting aside a day to focus on romance when romance is often filled with so many empty promises. And Valentine's Day is so syrupy and sugary and yucky. All kinds of bad poems and bad jokes crop up;

Roses are red

Pizza is cheesy

Getting along with you is easy. (That's actually a poem that I wrote into a card back when I was in college.)

The comedian Rita Rudner once said, "I don't understand why Cupid was chosen to represent Valentine's Day. When I think about romance, the last thing on my mind is a short, chubby toddler coming at me with a weapon. She also once said, "I think men who have a pierced ear are better prepared for marriage. They've already experienced pain and bought jewelry."

One more- Jim asked his friend Tony whether he had bought his wife anything for Valentine's Day. "Yes," said Tony, who was a bit of a chauvinist. "I've bought her a belt and a bag." "That was very kind of you," Jim noted. "I'm sure she appreciates your thoughtfulness." "I hope so," Tony replied. "And hopefully the vacuum cleaner will work better now."

Valentine's Day is based on a real person, you know. He was made a saint early in the life of the church. We really don't know that much about St. Valentine. The *Legenda Aurea* by Jacobus de Voragine, compiled around the year 1260, was one of the most widely read books in the Middle Ages. It gave a little bio of each saint to inspire sermons throughout the church year. The very brief description of St. Valentine has him refusing to deny Christ before the Emperor Claudius in the year 280. Popular legend has it that Valentine was a priest who secretly married young lovers despite an imperial edict against it, the emperor believing that domestic bliss weakened the martial spirits of the young men. Before his head was cut off, Valentine restored sight and hearing to his jailer's daughter. A note to his jailer's daughter to her before he died was said to have been the original Valentine's card. The point here is that the original St. Valentine had given himself over to loving even those who would take his life and helping those who loved deeply. He honored loved, offered love, and died for love. That's the kind of love that makes up the kingdom.

Jesus said, we have a new commandment to follow at it is simply this: Love. Love each other. Love as Jesus loved. Jesus committed himself to his disciples and stayed with them until his life ended. Love. Pour out yourself as a gift for someone, for many, for all. People will know that you follow Jesus if you love.

Valentine's Day is our holiday, church. We should be known as the experts on love, the finest example of people who can live in solid relationships with each other. Healthy marriages, parents and children who love and respect each other, friendships that are rich and boundaried, brothers and sisters in Christ who sometimes grow closer to us than our own biological sisters and brothers- all of these should be found right here. The world needs to see these things from us. It is a part of our evangelism. It brings hope in a lonely and conflicted and warring world.

I think relationships are so important that I have committed a major part of my adult life studying them and supporting them. Four years at the Council for Relationships in Philadelphia with thousands of client hours and hundreds of hours of supervision working with marriages and families. Five years of earning my doctorate in marriage and family ministries at Palmer Seminary. I did all this

because I know unless we have healthy marriages we will never have healthy communities. It is a social justice for me- healthy marriages keep children out of poverty. The correlation is extremely strong. And so I want to do everything I can as a pastor to strengthen the marriages in our midst, to help launch new marriages in the healthiest way possible, to help individuals heal from their divorces and give them the kind of hope that comes from a God of second chances, to support people who make the biblical choice to be single, as Paul chose to, to help everyone negotiate fulfilling relationships that lead to abundant life within the community.

There is a Chinese proverb which says, "When there is love in a marriage, there is harmony in the home; when there is harmony in the home, there is contentment in the community; when there is contentment in the community, there is prosperity in the nation; when there is prosperity in the nation, there is peace in the world." Today let's pray for harmony in our homes, however our home is configured- a mother and father, a mother and child, grandparents raising a grandchild, two moms raising their children- there is so much diversity in home life today, but all need to have love and understanding and rules and boundaries for them to survive, for their life sentence of being a family to become a lifetime of abundant living.

Today's epistle lesson is about rules in our households. I know most of the women in the church were shaking their heads when this scripture was read (and some of the men were smiling- admit it). Scholars refer to this passage as a household code which sets out certain rules or principles. And some of our more confused sisters and brothers take this passage and use it to oppress women in marriage- the husband is the head of the wife, man is the head of the household. They think some kind of hierarchy is set up so that when a bottom line decision has to be made the man's word is law and the woman must submit to it. It is frightening to me how wrong that interpretation is. Jesus says love one another and yet some men use this scripture to treat their life-partner like a servant or a slave. Men who abuse their wives verbally or physically love this passage and use it to justify their sin. That's why whenever I hear of a church getting anywhere near teaching this passage in that way, I walk away. If I read a marriage resource where that kind of interpretation comes anywhere near slipping in, I put it down.

Husbands and wives, Jesus said, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." If you love Jesus you'll listen to what your spouse says and fulfill their wishes to the best of your ability. You'll see a hierarchy mentioned in here, men over women, women over children, children over the house servants. But that hierarchy was already alive and well. It was assumed in their highly patriarchal society. Paul is taking to his society as it was. He is taking that hierarchy that is in place and flattening it. There is only one step that matters- Jesus above all of us. Be a subject of his and you'll be led to be a subject of one another. Respect and love- that's all that should flow between husbands and wives. Neither one of you should be lord over the other- there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ. Paul is actually moving that ancient institution of marriage towards greater equality in his day between husband and wife.

As for our Old Testament Lesson- OK, ladies I am two for two today in intimidating you with the scriptures read. Again, some have interpreted these verses as trying to direct women to be 1950's housewives again- an era when many women felt trapped and stuck and there was actually a fairly high suicide rate among housewives. No, no, no. Let's look at this passage for what it really is, an ode to a good spouse, whether a man or a woman, a song in celebration of a life well lived, whether married or single.

A capable wife who can find.

It is really a shame we can't read the Hebrew here. Because it has multiple meanings. It can be just as easily translated as a capable woman, a valiant woman, a mighty woman.

And from there the verses form an acrostic, which means each verse starts with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet in order. It is kind of a fun form of Hebrew poetry, light, simple observations of what makes life good.

And it is a shame we didn't read the beginning of the book of Proverbs too, this morning. Then we would know that the beginning of proverbs and the end of proverbs both focus on a woman. The

woman in the beginning is the image of wisdom. The woman in the end may be the living embodiment of the wisdom teachings in proverbs. In other words, it is wise to live your life this way:

Develop trusting relationships so that people know when you make a mistake and they get hurt, it is not because you meant to do them harm. You wish to do them only good. Work hard at your business whether it is working flax and wool with your hands or buying and selling. Take care of your children. (Interesting- that appears to be only a small part of what a person is called to do.) Live with strength and dignity and laugh loudly and often. Speak only with words that are wise and kind. And don't be fooled by charm and beauty. A person who fears the Lord is far more charming and far more beautiful in the long run.

Are you looking for a partner? Look for these traits. Are you trying to be the best husband or wife you can be? Follow these proverbs.

In a moment we are going to honor the relationships in our midst, act on the love we have between us and encourage that love to grow. We'll be praying for many different kinds of people and relationships but primarily we will be remembering our marriage vows and praying for the marriages among us. When I mentioned that I wanted to do this today, I got a number of different reactions, most of them positive. One person asked if they could wear their wedding gown. Another said they were going to buy a new dress for this Sunday. I heard a few say, "I am going to make my husband take me out for lunch." I also get the feeling that some folks might have tried to avoid church today to not take part, because the marriage vows are so personal or maybe they were nervous in some way, thinking I would make you come down front of something.

Today we are remembering our marriage vows because our marriage is not a solely private matter, not by a long shot. It is a public event, a promise made before lots of people, a commitment that the rest of the community depends upon. You have family and friends that expect you to stay together, want to grow old with you, and want to rely on you as a couple forever. So, it is appropriate for our church from time to time to help strengthen the bond that we helped create.

As Mother Theresa said, "Spread love everywhere you go: first of all in your own house. Give love to your children, to your wife or husband, to a next-door neighbor. ... Let no one ever come to you without leaving better and happier. Be the living expression of God's kindness: kindness in your face, kindness in your eyes, kindness in your smile, kindness in your warm greeting."

As we enter our time of remembrance and prayer I invite couples to sit by each other if you are in different places here for some reason. Take a moment. Hold Hands. Turn and face each other. And let's fill this room with love and kindness.

Happy Valentine's Day.